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Premont's Path:

The story of a Texas school district overcoming a death sentence

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Premont's Path:

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by

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Premont's Path:

The story of a Texas school district overcoming a death sentence

by

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Premont ISD, in Premont, Texas, faced years of academic and financial troubles. In 2011, when the school district was finally on a path to improvement, the state ordered Premont to be closed and absorbed into a nearby district. Yet a new superintendent was determined to save Premont and try to ensure every student under his supervision would receive a quality education close to home. This report maps the decisions made, the state's response and the community's reaction to the near demise of its school district.

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It was first week of the new 2012-2013 school year at Premont Independent School District in the South Texas town of the same name. Typical of a fresh start anywhere, teachers and administrators welcomed students back with high expectations. In Premont High School's aging building, laughter and greetings in English and Spanish, echoed through the hallways and trickled out of a half dozen classrooms along the upper story.

"Andale, andale! Get to class mijo!" a teacher urged as she hurried past a group of students moseying up the staircase off the main hall of the high school. "Es la tiempo para clase! It's time for class! Hustle, hustle!"

Surveying the students from across the corridor, superintendent Ernest Singleton's gaze came to rest on a banner hanging just across from him: "Welcome Cowboys and Cowgirls!" A tall, courtly 61-year-old who stands head and shoulders above his students and staff, Singleton smiled and watched with not only obvious delight, but also relief.

"This was the year we weren't even supposed to exist as a school district any more," he said, referring to the fact that in July 2011 state educational authorities marked the two existing schools of Premont ISD for closure. The third campus – the middle school – had been closed the previous year as a cost-saving measure.

Caught in the crosshairs of federal and state education reform – struggling with failing student grades, declining enrollment and a shrinking budget, Premont ISD was only the fifth district in the state's history to be marked for permanent shutdown. Premont's troubles, as outlined by the Texas Education Agency, were both deep and wide. Singleton knew them all: too many teachers and not enough students; decrepit facilities; poor instruction practices; and low rates of parent involvement. State funding placed Premont ISD in the bottom 20 percent of lowest funded districts in the state – and there would be less money coming in since the state cut $5.4 billion out of public education to balance its own budget during the 2011 legislative session.

This is the story of how Singleton, with the help of his Premont colleagues, spent what he describes as the most difficult year of his 32 years in education turning around a district marked for almost certain death. Today, both schools are more vibrant than they have been in years. There are new science labs, qualified teachers, students in class and parents volunteering.

According to the latest audit, there is a positive fund balance of $513,000 and test scores have improved.

But Premont has not yet cleared the final hurdle. By December 31, TEA officials will decide whether the changes the district has put into place are enough to put talk of closure on lasting hold. Singleton says he would be surprised if TEA failed to give Premont a green light. Then again, Singleton's time in the district has been marked by many surprises, not all of them pleasant.

Into the fray

When Singleton arrived in Premont in 2010, he had no intention of becoming directly responsible for turning around a failing school district. TEA assigned the former Leadership Specialist for Education Service Center 2, which serves South Texas schools, as conservator of Premont ISD. His job was to oversee the district's restructuring plan and advise the then-leadership how to improve the district. The district's accreditation was under probation at the time, and Singleton had experience turning schools around.

"Helping chart pathways to success for all children has been my life-long passion and journey," Singleton said. "I have always guided classrooms, campuses, and districts to be a place that I would want my own children and grandchildren to attend."

But, he says he his suggestions for change were met with a profound lack of enthusiasm.

"It was very frustrating for Ernest to be a conservator, and not be able to make changes," Jamie Morris, Premont's current TEA monitor assigned to ensure implementation, evaluation and reporting of the restructuring plan, said. "He knew what needed to be changed, but as a conservator, you can only listen and give feedback. You can't make the changes yourself."

When the board opted to not renew the contract of the previous superintendent, Singleton threw his hat in the ring. He was named interim superintendent in June 2011, oblivious the state would, in a few short weeks, order the district closed as of July 1, 2012.

In late July 2011, Singleton received a call from TEA and said he was told to just wait by the fax, which he did quietly to avoid causing alarm in the small building he shares with his administrative staff and the city's tax assessor. By the vague message, Singleton said he knew

something was wrong. The pages that came across the machine were dreadful: The TEA was revoking the district's accreditation and closing the district.

In its report, the TEA noted a slew of issues, including more than two dozen occurrences of non-compliance in the Special Education department; inadequate instruction; two science labs and entire wings of buildings infested with mold; and teachers not qualified by federal standards.

The district had received the state's lowest academic rating – Academically Unacceptable – in 2009 and 2011. It had operated with a financial deficit for the past four years. Its cash flow was under $20,000 – not nearly enough to operate if the state didn't send a check.

"It was shocking. I had no idea that is what was coming," Singleton said. "I knew the district was in bad shape, but never expected that."

Morris echoed the state's concerns leading up to the closure order, citing a complete lack of curriculum leadership, budget management systems or focus on student performance before Singleton's arrival. Morris' main concern was the previous lack of direction for teachers or students.

"When you walked into classrooms, there were kids sitting on desks, talking, texting, sending emails. They'd be up writing on the board and playing," Morris said. "The teacher may or may not have been trying to teach a lesson. There were kids in the hallways, fights, no order at all."

Saddled with the unenviable task of putting the broken school system back together, Singleton said there was never a question of whether he would shy away from the problems he inherited.

"Every child has worth and value," Singleton said. "It is my role to become the vehicle by which they can find opportunities to succeed and flourish."

By August, Singleton addressed a $213,000 budget deficit by combining the middle and high school campuses and addressing overstaffing, developed a leadership task force to address curriculum and instruction and set expectations for the coming year. Despite the immediate changes that absolved many of the state's concerns, on Oct. 23, 2011, the state officially assigned Premont an accreditation status of Not Accredited-Revoked, effective July 1, 2012, and ordered both Premont campuses – elementary and high school – to be closed at the end of the school year and annexed the district into neighboring district San Diego ISD, 35 miles away.

With the district being the largest employer in town, a serious question as to whether the town of Premont itself would cease to exist now hung in the balance.

Tardy, not absent

The town, Premont, a desolate place straddling a four-lane section of Highway 281, has a handful of Mexican food restaurants, a gas station and few other commercial businesses. One hotel offers a dozen rooms for out-of-town oil field workers.

Premont's first oil well was drilled in 1933, 12 years after Premont ISD was incorporated. With the discovery of oil in the area, Premont grew from 600 people to nearly 1,100 by 1939. The small, predominantly Hispanic town reached its peak population of 3,282 by 1970, and jobs were plentiful in the mainstay local industries: oil production and dairy farming.

However, during the last two decades a different story has unfolded. Jobs dried up with the oil bust and residents moved to nearby cities with established economies that could sustain the downfall. Agriculture faltered following a series of droughts in the state, and to make matters worse, the state is rebuilding Highway 281 – with a loop around Premont. Once the bustling center of Jim Wells County, the town is now just a stop between the larger towns of Falfurrias and Alice, the county seat. With fewer than 3,000 residents, little employment exists outside of Premont ISD, the town's largest employer with 87 jobs. If the district were to close, the town would likely die with it.

Once a premier district with its own rodeo arena, a 30-acre agriculture farm and state of the art buildings, Premont ISD has kept the town alive, but has experienced the same peaks and valleys. The student population has declined by more than 25 percent in the last five years – down from around 800 in 2006 to just 570 students in 2011.

Stunned by the state's decision to close the school, the dwindling community was angered by the decisions Singleton made to rectify the district's plight – mainly the decision to cancel sports for a year. Residents knew the district needed money, but had never been supportive of raising taxes – failing two tax ratification elections in recent years. Area districts knew Premont's plight, but had never been able to share funds or resources.

"We don't take closure lightly," TEA Information Specialist DeEtta Culbertson said. "Ultimately, it is about ensuring that Texas children are going to get the best education they can and we looked very closely at that in Premont. The commissioner felt like students would be ill-served if Premont were allowed to stay open."

On the brink of Premont's closure, Singleton and the school board called a tax ratification election in November 2011 to increase taxes funding the district, saying it was a gamble, but the decision could show the state the community was willing to support the long-struggling school district.

The gamble paid off. Premont voters finally passed a tax increase, providing additional funding to the district, attendance increased and the district began to demonstrate noticeable improvements in instruction quality, classroom management and finances. In December, the district and former Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott, in a rare move, agreed to a one-year reprieve which would temporarily halt the closure until at least Dec. 31, 2012.

With the passage of the tax election and headway in the classrooms, Culbertson said TEA saw that the Premont community was painfully aware of the district's situation and was willing to support the school.

"That is what we wanted to see – that if we let them remain open that we wouldn't be back in this situation in a few years," she said.

The state's abatement agreement required acceptable progress on 11 items: Academic performance, attendance rate, highly qualified teachers, teacher evaluation and retention, renovated science labs, mold remediation, a facilities inspection and report, a facilities needs assessment, financial audit, retiring an outstanding line of credit and federal compliance with regard to programs and operations.

With a $213,000 deficit, Singleton said he was unsure where the nearly $700,000 needed to do most of the work would come from. The amnesty spurred Singleton and the board to action to bring the district back from the dead but meant the community would face drastic decisions of a type Singleton had never made in his long educational career.

"I had gone over the books; I had looked at the scores. I knew it could be done. It was just unclear whether we could meet all [the state's] demands in time – in a year – and if the community would support us," Singleton said, adding that regardless of the circumstances, he would "work until the end to save the school."

Getting the house in order

Singleton was used to making tough decisions. As the former director of curriculum and special programs in Benavides ISD in Benavides, Texas, 28 miles northeast of Premont, he had helped turn around Benavidez Junior High, saving it from closure. But that was just one school, not an entire district, he said. Also a former program specialist for TEA, Singleton knew the resolve he and the district would need to clear the hurdle in front of them.

As conservator, Singleton spotted the first challenge in Premont: Too many staff, overestimating student enrollment and not enough qualified teachers, all leading to a financial hole. To exacerbate the problem, Premont was one of the lowest funded districts out of the state's 1,023. Only 200 districts receive less funding than Premont.

In 2005, the Texas Supreme Court deemed the previous school funding system a statewide property tax, which is not allowed under the Texas Constitution. That decision prompted lawmakers to rework funding for schools and create a "target revenue" system that was partly based on a district's property wealth in 2005 in addition to a complicated funding formula. The current funding system, put in place in 2006, was designed to reduce reliance on property taxes to fund schools, but instead resulted in districts with lower property values, like rural Premont, receiving unjustifiably different amounts of funding per student.

For example, according to state data, Premont receives $4,920 per year per pupil, less than the state average of $5,428. The highest funded district, Westbrook ISD, a district in oil-rich West Texas, receives $13,122 per student. Regardless of whether a district's property values have increased or decreased since 2006, the target revenue system and the funding formula did not change. Under the system, a district will, today, still receive the same amount of funding they did in 2005, regardless of whether they are wealthier or poorer. For district's like Premont, whose property value is just over $139 million of the state's total $1.69 trillion, rising costs to educate students can be a burden.

The article “State Funding System Must Share Blame for Loss of Accreditation and Forced Closure,” published by the Equity Center, a research and advocacy organization that represents Texas schoolchildren, says the funding system has put Premont at a disadvantage of more than $1.3 million annually.

“If Premont were funded at the state average for the past two years, they would have $1,327,000 to pay back the $400,000 debt, remediate mold damage and the other facility-related corrections mandated by the TEA,” the Equity Center said.

The argument is one that has wafted through the state capitol for decades, setting off years of courtroom wrangling over the most efficient and equitable way to fund students in Texas. The latest and largest lawsuit in state history involves more than half the districts in the state arguing, again, inefficient and inequitable funding. The target revenue system was designed to mitigate the inequity in the system, but in reality, made it clearer. But, while the financial inequity in the system and the clear negative impact on Premont’s financial health is astonishing to some, Singleton remains philosophical.

“Yes, we are underfunded. I’d even say I don’t think the state is meeting its obligation,” he said. “But, this district has had a history of [other] financial problems. All we can do is fix the ones we [can fix] and worry about the rest later.”

The result was that Singleton placed his focus on more immediate problems: A deficit budget, overspending, low attendance and poor grades.

Upon Singleton’s assignment as superintendent, Premont faced a $213,000 deficit after years of not rectifying issues he said were clearly evident. In his first few weeks, Singleton tried to get a handle on the district’s most pressing problem: Cash flow.

“When I got here and I asked how much money was in the bank, the answer was ‘about 12.’ I said ’12 what?’” Singleton said. “When I heard we only had $12,000 in the bank until the state made our next payment, I was shocked. I couldn’t believe the district operated that way. It was like they were living pay check to pay check.”

Singleton immediately put a system in place that would not allow a single dollar to be spent unless it had been approved by two supervisors, including Singleton himself, and only if the

money was available in the budget. Those steps proved crucial following drastic state funding cuts. The move accounted for and protected the district from a number of funding issues, including the main challenges of the Texas funding puzzle.

“We started the year off by immediately taking the money to cover the deficit out of our budget,” Singleton said. “It was tight, but it had to be done to make sure we didn’t get ourselves in a worse position.”

Texas schools are funded on a number of factors, including student average daily attendance. If, at the end of the year, the average daily attendance is lower than what a district estimated, then additional revenue received must be paid back to the state. If attendance comes in higher, the district receives a payment to catch up.

To that end, Singleton cut the budget further, accounting for fewer students than anticipated. With 570 students and a previous attendance rate of 88 percent, Singleton said he felt comfortable estimating enrollment at around 520 – accounting for the often sparse attendance.

“For any school district, being successful is a matter of prioritizing spending,” Morris said. “Once Ernest did that, the rest were decisions that needed to just be made. And I think that is what weighed on him so much in the beginning.”

The writing on the wall

In August 2011, after the initial closure order arrived and still three weeks before school was to start, Singleton and his leadership team – campus administrators, teachers, staff and stakeholders – sat stoically around a 12-person conference table trying to come up with solutions to the list of problems at Premont that state had identified. On the wall were white sheets of easel paper outlining all 11.

That’s when the sticky notes started. The team, including teachers, the high school and elementary principals, and members of the business office, scribbled ideas, suggestions and questions on the yellow squares and stuck them to the wall. Singleton was convinced the answer was there somewhere. One by one, he and the team decided for or against the suggestions and either moved them to their appropriate easel sheet on the opposite wall or condemned them to the trash.

Combine the middle school and high school. Check. Cut back staff. Check. Singleton said both helped reduce the district's financial deficit. Reduce teacher pay. That isn't legal under Texas contract law. No check. Attendance incentives. Check. That helped improve attendance rates. Curriculum alignment. Check. That helped academic performance. Renovate the science labs. Singleton said he worried about where the district would get the money to overhaul the two rooms, so the team left that problem until a solution could be found.

Over the next three months, the team whittled away at the suggestions and continued to rack their brains for solutions to the outstanding issues: The science labs, a mandated facilities study, ensuring all teachers met the required federal Highly Qualified status, staff retention, mold remediation, inspections and an audit. All required an outlay of cash the district didn't have.

Singleton's leadership and guidance to the leadership team led to immediate and drastic changes in the district, and clear improvement, Morris said.

"Since Ernest has been here, I haven't had to impose a single directive," Morris said. "He's known what needs to be done and he is very talented and capable."

But, there was still one sticky note that hadn't been talked about. The words written on it were almost considered heresy to some. After all, this was Texas and the subject was high school sports. But Singleton was glad someone had raised the subject. Should Premont consider sacrificing its sports program?

Singleton made what was arguably his most controversial decision. He would cancel sports.

Academics or athletics?

"That decision was one of the hardest I've ever made. I was worried about the students, about the town," Singleton said. "I didn't know if they would understand, if it would have the opposite impact or what. But, it was the decision that got people's attention."

It started slowly at first. The Corpus Christi Caller-Times picked up the story. The headline read: "No more sports as Premont plays for keeps." Then, it went national. Fox News reported on a Texas district that canceled sports "in hopes of improving grades," spelling the tiny South Texas town's name incorrectly. The media spotlight had settled on Premont, the district that canceled sports to save its schools.

“Academics is what was most important. We had to be an instruction focused district,” Singleton said. “I know sports are a sacred ground here, and I know it seemed drastic.”

Singleton saved the district $150,000 by cutting out sports – funds that went to tutoring, staff development and curriculum resources. Out of a total budget of $5.4 million, it wasn’t a lot, but it was enough to help refurbish the science labs and put electronic boards in every classroom. But, to some, the decision was unforgivable, Singleton said.

“People got up and walked out of restaurants when I walked in,” Singleton said. “Some wouldn’t even acknowledge me.”

Parents questioned the move at board meetings, saying the loss of sports could hinder student performance and hurt attendance -- two of the biggest issues Singleton was trying to rectify. For Jesus Infante, no football meant his son, Alex, a football standout, would go to another school district. Like Infante, many parents felt cancelling sports was a hindrance to their children’s education. Dozens spoke out at board meetings early in the process, threatening to withdraw their children, though only 15 students withdrew from the district.

But, the decision that many decried, may have been exactly what was needed to save the district, Singleton said. The decision created an emergency state. The local headlines talked of voters fighting to save their school. Parents and community members started attending board meetings and public forums and, more importantly, students started coming to the schools.

The first sign of the district making a turnaround was attendance.

On the third day of school this fall, the morning bells at Premont High School had rung and the district’s attendance was at 489 students – 16 students more than the district’s goal.

Getting students to go to school had become increasingly difficult in the past six years. The district has long struggled with high teen pregnancy rates and poverty rates, leading to drastically low attendance.

“We can teach students and give them the tools to pass the test. But they have to pass it,” Singleton said. “We can track them down at their homes and explain to mom and dad – or grandma or aunt – why they need to be in school, but they still have to show up.”

The halls of Premont High School were quiet during first period— a sight that brought a sigh of relief for Singleton. Quiet, empty hallways meant students were in class, and teachers were teaching. After watching his staff and students get their historic school day started, Singleton, still with a smile on his face, trekked out of the school and up the street to his office – a quick three-minute walk. "The Situation Room," as it was called during the months following the closure order, was organized.

Decorated with piles of binders, stacks of papers, facility studies, pictures of his two children, and the abatement agreement, it was calmer than it was over the summer. Large sheets of easel paper still cover the walls behind Singleton's conference table, all but two were assigned a number one to 11, and a date. Some are dotted with sticky notes, some with dollar amounts. Two sheets have nothing but a date: Accountability and Attendance.

"Attendance is going to be an ongoing thing. We won't stop knocking on students doors just because we met our goal," Singleton said. "Academics will be our deciding factor I think. We have tests coming up that will tell us a lot."

Making the grade

Premont ISD was one of just two Texas districts facing closure by the state in 2011, one of five in the state's history. Premont's abatement agreement is the first time Austin has ever given a district a chance to prove itself. The other district – North Forest ISD outside of Houston – was only offered a reprieve after Premont successfully demonstrated improvement and received theirs.

With more than three quarters of its students considered economically disadvantaged and 95.1 percent of its student population Hispanic – many of whom are children of immigrants – Premont's issues are exacerbated by funding inequities because the cost to educate their students is typically higher. When Premont wasn't funded in the bottom 20 percent of the state's school districts, money helped educate a mobile Hispanic population that didn't come to school with a strong education foundation. According to demographer Steve Trejo with the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin, the impact of funding inequity to poor school districts is noticeable – academically and financially.

"Children of immigrants are expensive to educate well," Trejo said. "A lot of rural areas are very poor Hispanic or Mexican American families that don't speak English… That creates problems for schools. It increases their need for bilingual teachers and other resources."

The need for additional resources compounded with a high poverty level, adds to the difficulty facing the district. With an annual household income of just over $22,000, families and students in Premont don't have advantages that other children in wealthier areas of the state have, Singleton said.

"There is something to be said about reading to your child, having family vacations together and spending family time together," Morris said. "Premont has children and families that don't have those rich experiences at a young age."

For Leticia Vera, a 35-year Premont resident and 4th grade teacher at Premont Elementary, parental involvement within the district has waned in recent years, which she attributes to culture and parent's personal experience.

"A lot of our parents are not educated past high school," she said. "A lot of them had a bad experience with school and they don't like coming up here. They don't like being involved."

Missing out on those experiences creates a learning gap for students that Premont must overcome. The increased cost of educating economically disadvantaged students combined with poor attendance and drastic state funding cuts to public education left Premont in the worst situation imaginable: not enough money to support a population in need.

"It would be hard to educate those students in the best of circumstances, and in (Premont's) situation it is likely extremely difficult," Trejo said.

In 2011, about 39 percent of Premont students passed all state tests, down from 44 percent the previous year. Under the former accountability system, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, about 48 percent of Premont students passed all tests. Only 31 percent of high school students passed compared to 37 percent at the state level.

With the shift to the STAAR test in 2012, it is difficult to compare results, but a summary of 10th and 11th grade students show that 86 percent of students passed all English tests and 61 percent

of students passed science, considerable increases from previous years. On all tests, 96 percent of students K-6 earned passing scores and 92 percent of students 7-12 earned passing scores.

For Premont, the educational gap between its students and those of other districts has been clear, but it falls in line with much of the state. According to Trejo, the bulk of the U.S. Hispanic population is children of immigrants. More than a third of Hispanics in Texas are under the age of 18, he said. Over the last decade, Latinos accounted for two-thirds of the state's overall growth. By 2050, nearly two thirds of students in Texas will be Latino, according to demographic projections from Rice University.

Those projections promise increased costs for education in the years to come, Trejo said.

As of 2010, 40.4 percent of U.S. Hispanics in Texas 25 and older had not completed their high school degree, according to the United States Census Bureau. Only a quarter earned high school diplomas and just 11.6 percent had college degrees. Compare that with Anglos: eight percent of those adults didn't finish high school, 25.3 percent received a diploma. Just 11.6 percent of Texas Hispanics had college degrees compared to 34.1 percent of Anglos.

Michael Williams, Texas Governor Rick Perry's new appointee as Texas Education Commissioner, aims to address the needed changes in his new position. At his first meeting with the State Board of Education in early November, Williams said Texas' system for rating schools should be largely based on how well districts are doing to close the achievement gap between white and minority students.

"In a state that is 60 percent economically disadvantaged and 60 percent black and brown, we've got to be concerned about closing that racial achievement gap, because indeed, our demographics are changing," Williams told the board.

According to the latest TEA figures, 92 percent of white students graduated on time in 2011, compared with 82 percent of Hispanic and 81 percent of African-American students. But for Premont, the prominent issue that comes with an undereducated minority is the lack of a foundation students begin with.

“The students that come to Premont just don’t have the foundation that other students have,” Morris said. “That is why this district has got to be learner-focused and support teachers in doing their jobs.”

In addition to her role in the classroom, Vera also works with about a dozen community members in a grassroots activist group, Premont P.R.I.D.E., or Premont Residents Involved in Dynamic Education, and says that the community’s involvement has come with offering education – and not just academic – for Premont parents.

“We really needed to help our families understand the importance of education,” she said. “Since Mr. Singleton has been here, our whole school has seen a big difference with parents. We’ve seen many more parents involved and helping because he is so open and helpful.”

Vera and Premont PRIDE worked for months following the group’s inception in September 2011 to advocate for the passage of the tax election, explaining to parents who may have never entered their child’s school, the importance of funding. The activism brought many parents to the schools, Vera said, where she and other teachers recognized another issue: lack of resources.

“When we saw that other people were willing to do something, we did what we could,” Vera said. “Resources are what our parents need. When parents and kids have what they need to live, it is easier for them to learn.”

Premont PRIDE, along with the county and City of Premont organized resource fairs to get parents in touch with county services, including food stamps, child health resources, clothing and housing assistance – many resources that are available only with a trip to Alice, 28 miles away. Making those resources available influenced parent involvement, Vera said, which she believes has spurred the increase in passing rates in the district.

“Last year, we had maybe six parents show up to a meeting to discuss report cards at the high school,” Singleton said. “This year, we had more than 150. That is a difference.”

With that, Singleton stands by his controversial decision to cancel sports, saying none of the change in the local community would have come about without it.

“Canceling sports was the decision that got us on the road to saving this district,” he said.

The second sign of the turnaround was the money.

A community of schools

In February the first donations came in when school districts offered Premont a sneak preview at their surplus auctions – chairs, desks, computers, tables – all equipment that Premont wasn't financially capable of buying or replacing – even though the state was demanding so.

"One dollar. That's what brand new chairs and tables for our science labs and our classrooms cost us," Singleton said. "I couldn't believe it when Corpus Christi ISD told us it was ours for a dollar. They couldn't give it to us, so they sold it to us at the cheapest possible price."

A Corpus Christi Foundation, The Ed Rachal Foundation, donated $100,000. Valero donated $20,000. Another district offered to pay for their required facilities study. Premont PRIDE raised another $20,000. A foundation associated with the parent company of the local Dairy Queen gave $25,000. The donations started pouring in.

"We did bake sales, anything," Vera said. "Premont PRIDE was so wonderful in getting money together for our schools. It was so touching to see the support that came for [the schools] so PRIDE knew we had to do it, too."

An anonymous donor gave $15,000. Money came from all over. But the most impressive donations came from the least expected donators: Texas students.

"I couldn't believe it. Kids across South Texas donated their own pennies, their own money to help our students," Singleton said, tearing up as he told the stories. "They paid 50 cents to wear pajamas to school, they held Pennies for Premont fundraisers, car washes, bake sales, everything. These were kids that just wanted our kids to have the same education they were getting."

The student fundraisers brought in $65,000.

Before the next bell rang on the third day of school, Singleton, walked back to the high school and made his way back upstairs. He stopped by an empty, darkened classroom. The room – barren with no desks, open ceilings and a fine film of plaster on the floor – looked like it had been abandoned. But, the long-empty room was getting a makeover – something that has been needed for years.

“We had enough money to redo this classroom after we finished the science labs,” Singleton said, tearing up as he finished sharing his appreciation for students across the state. “It’s not quite done yet, but it will be really nice for our kids when it is finished.”

Just months before, the classroom, along with the two science labs next door were the bane of the high school’s existence and one of the sticking points for Commissioner Scott. The two labs next door were closed because of a mold infestation. Scott called them a health hazard and rated them as high as poor academics and low attendance on the list of Premont’s problems.

Now, the two labs are lined with brand new desks, newly built lab tables and shiny equipment in new cabinets. They smell of fresh paint instead of mold and are the only rooms in the high school with recessed lighting. Bright and clean with new technology – iPads mounted on lab tables – the labs look like they were placed in the upstairs of the high school accidentally.

“They really do look like we picked them up out of a brand new high school and just dropped them in here,” Singleton said.

At 9:44 a.m., the the third bell of the third day at the high school rang, signaling students to their third period class. In Delia Garcia’s geometry class, seven students sat in a semi-circle gazing at a brand new Promethean board – an interactive board that allows teachers to save notes that are written on them. With the donations, the district was able to fit each classroom with one. The technology was something Premont students had never seen before.

The class is smaller than Garcia’s other classes: Pre-Cal and Remedial Math.

“¿Sabe usted qué es un extremo? Do you know what a ray is?” Garcia asked, drawing a large dot on the electronic board and extending a line with an arrow on the end. The class was building on the previous day’s lesson of what a ray is.

One of the students, new to the class and to the district as of that day, is quickly taken in by two of her classmates who explain in hushed Spanish what the lesson is and what she should be doing. In this class, Mrs. Garcia and the students teach. More than half of the lesson is in Spanish for those that are still learning English. Each of the seven students is fluent in Spanish.

When a student in the front of the class put his head down, his classmate behind him poked him with a pencil. “Levantante,” she said, encouraging the sleeper to stay awake and pay attention. Later, she invited him to sit at her desk to work on their assignment together.

Down the hall, in Nina Farris’ fourth period English I class, six students showed up.

“Where is everyone? This is not everyone that should be in this class,” Farris asked the students sitting scattered among the cemetery rows of desks. She was expecting 12 more. A look of worry on her face, Farris reminded the students why it is important to be in class.

“Yes it is important so you can learn, but it is important for your school and your classmates, too,” she said.

The other students explained that their classmates are working on another project and would be there shortly. So Farris quickly started her lesson, controlling the class with ease and building engagement right away. Pointing to handmade signs on the wall, she reminded the students of the lesson from earlier in the week. Her students identified various prefixes and suffixes and were coming up with examples of how they are used, completely unaware it was their teacher’s first week in a classroom teaching and Farris showed no indication of it.

Farris taught up until the bell, reminding her students on their way out of class about their homework and complimenting them on their hard work.

“I came to this school because I believe in what they are doing,” Farris said as students trickled in for the next period. “I believe that all of these students can learn and I want to be a part of something great.”

In total, Premont ISD received more than $315,000 in donations – enough money to refurbish the two shuttered science labs, add a third lab and add another red check mark to the growing collection on Singleton’s office wall. In addition, an area company donated a complete facilities study to the district to help satisfy that requirement. Though the district doesn’t plan to immediately do anything with the results, but Singleton said it will be good to know where the district stands with its facility needs.

Reasons to celebrate

Singleton's biggest worry at the beginning of his odyssey to save Premont schools was the timeline. One year to meet steep demands was unreasonable, he said.

"If my hair wasn't already gray, everyone would have seen the color go," he said, chuckling. Helping chart pathways to success for all children has been his life-long passion and journey, he said. The stress at Premont was like nothing he had experienced.

"When Ernest first got here, he had a sparkle in his eye. I would ask him how he was enjoying it and he'd say he was loving it," Morris said. "But as it got into the first months and under the closure, it affected him. His shoulders slumped a little more and he wasn't enjoying it as much."

But, slowly, the check marks made it on the white easel sheets in Singleton's office. Time seemed to play no part. For the first time in five years, Premont received a passing score on its Financial Integrity Rating System of Texas report. Another red check mark. This year, with more than $713,000 in the bank, the district had something to celebrate. Last year, with its $213,000 deficit, the district automatically earned a score of zero.

The $400,000 line of credit that had continually drained the district's bank accounts was finally paid off – three months ahead of the Dec. 31 cut off. All teachers are highly qualified, the mold is cleaned up and students are all wearing matching red polo shirts. For the first time at the high school, a dress code of red polo shirts is required. The shirts are a subtle change, but Singleton believes they will help maintain the "Cowboy Pride" that has surfaced among the more drastic transformations the district and its students have gone through.

"When Mr. Singleton came in, he made it clear to everyone that those who stayed were going to be a part of something special, but not everyone had to stay," Vera said, pointing out the dangers a teacher faced choosing to remain in a school on the brink closure. "Those of us that are still here are here because we trust in him and we know he is leading us in the right direction."

Neither the Bilingual nor Special Education departments are under mandated improvement, or staging, as the state calls it. Another red check mark.

"At one point in time we had over 20 indicators out of compliance," Singleton said. "What an improvement!"

Another good sign? Attendance has remained high. Fearing a drop in attendance after the start of school, Singleton closely monitors the percentages every day. And every day his eyes sparkle a little more. The district is averaging 94 percent attendance – a six-percent increase over previous years.

The district also has a new intervention initiative at the secondary level that devotes 36 minutes of the day to credit recovery and intervention strategies for assessments within C-Scope. The district is still struggling with math performance, but the remediation strategies are showing improvement, which Singleton says should make all the difference to the state.

"The thing we are seeing now is that the students understand the importance of doing these things," Morris said. "They know … it has to happen real time, every day."

And if they don't pass, when and if football comes back, they won't be on the field. That is the case with basketball right now and students know it. So they keep their grades up. The season started up in October and the team has lost more than it has won with a 3-5 record – but only on the court, Singleton says.

"It will be interesting to monitor the change in campus climate," Singleton said. "The first 10 weeks have been so calm and so focused on academics. I am hoping that we maintain a healthy balance with sports returning."

And while basketball has returned, Singleton still has a decision weighing on his mind. Where and when does football fit in at Premont ISD?

"I'm all for football, I really am," he said. "But I have to look at it like this: We had football before and we were still a failing district. I'm not willing to endanger any of the progress we've made."

For Premont, the price of providing football for fewer than two dozen students is high – literally and figuratively. Singleton saved $150,000 canceling sports for a year. Money he says can go toward an early literacy program that will help provide books for all children and create those rich experiences he fears his students aren't getting.

For Morris, the district still has challenges — all districts do. But, for Premont, they shouldn't be anything that can't be overcome now. Though she doesn't say it, she knows the biggest change that will come to Premont will be the eventual exit of Singleton.

"The one constant in education is change," she said. "But if the systems are established and the processes are in place like they are in Premont now, the changes should help maintain in the face of user turnover."

The district has turned in reports and evidence of meeting several of the state's required improvement items and turned in its final abatement report to TEA in late November, more than a month ahead of its Dec. 31 deadline. The decision whether to close the school will remain up to the new Education Commissioner, Michael Williams. And now that the lists are checked off and the demands are met, the only question that still lies unanswered is will Premont ISD survive?

Canary in the coalmine

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Being on the brink of disaster, in an emergency state, led to Premont overcoming impending death. There was a rally cry, a wakeup call for the public: You are on the verge of losing your school, and in the process, your community. The community members stood up. They fought. They put their trust in leadership that was willing to do whatever it took to survive.

Singleton found truth in the belief that it is easier to move a school that is on the brink forward. And his story is one that districts across the state should pay attention to. How many school districts are operating like Premont was? In fear? Following politics and not putting students and education first? While only four districts have ever been shut down by the state, there have been a lot of threats – a lot of monitors and conservators – suggesting that this is not an isolated incident or problem.

How many other school districts may be teetering on the edge financially or with parental involvement, performance or attendance? Premont's recipe for disaster finally gelled together with not enough of each of these. But is it so far off to suggest that a number of districts in the state are at risk of heading down the Premont's path?

According to Joe Smith of TexasISD.com, as of Sept. 1, 428 tax elections have been held in Texas school districts to make up for the state's funding change in 2006. Of those, 147 elections have been called in the last two years, with a 78 percent ratification rate. In 2012, 88 percent of the 26 elections held as of Sept. 15 had been ratified, suggesting communities understand their districts are in need now more than ever, Smith said.

And while Singleton recognizes that funding alone isn't the issue behind his district's brush with failure, not having the money to fix the buildings, buy the supplies and train the teachers didn't encourage the community to support the district. The town wouldn't pass a tax election for the district until its emergency state. It was the money that came in – $383,000 in tax revenue and more than $315,000 in donations – and the larger lessons that came with it that changed the culture of the town.

For Singleton, his time in Premont has affected him like no other experience in his career, and has underscored his philosophy on education.

"My dream is that [Premont students] will empower themselves to be able to make their dreams become a reality," he said.

As the final bell rang that third day of school the year Premont ISD wasn't supposed to exist, Singleton seemed to recognize the value of what he had accomplished. With all the changes and buy in, on behalf of students and the town, Singleton said it was clear that the district must meet its goals – the town and the students depended on it.

"The town believes in us. And every day, little by little, we are doing what we said we would," Singleton said. "My hope is that Premont stays on this new pathway that has been carved to be that beacon of hope for every child that enters its doorways. We are all here for a very brief time on this earth. I want to rest one day knowing that I did everything within my power every day to provide a better way for the youth of Premont ISD.

For now, Singleton keeps the faith that there will be another first week of school next year and for many years to come. "I would be shell-shocked if there wasn't," he said.